

# *Teaching* COMMUNICATION

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LEARNING COMMUNICATIONS

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Routledge  
London and New York

First published in 1990  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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Typeset in 10/11 Times by Mayhew Typesetting, Bristol  
Printed in Great Britain by Richard Clay Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Burton, Graeme  
Teaching communication.  
1. Great Britain. Educational institutions.  
Curriculum subjects. Communication studies. Teaching  
I. Title II. Dimbleby, Richard  
001.51'07'041

ISBN 0-415-03062-5

ISBN 0-415-03063-3 pbk

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Burton, Graeme.  
Teaching communication / Graeme Burton and Richard Dimbleby.  
p. cm.  
Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.  
ISBN 0-415-03062-5. ISBN 0-415-03063-3 (pbk.)  
1. Communication – Study and teaching. I. Dimbleby, Richard.  
II. Title.  
P91.3.B8 1989 89-6429  
302.2'07-dc20

## Dedication

To both our families. Thank you for the hat trick.

# Acknowledgements

This book is a distillation of many hours of learning, listening, reading, practising, teaching, and talking about communication with many past and present colleagues and students. We owe debts directly and indirectly to more people and places than we realize for stimulating ideas and activities over many years. We have been, and are, fortunate in experiencing the excitement of working with colleagues who are committed to teaching communication.

We are also fortunate to have forbearing families who have been prepared to tolerate evenings, weekends and ‘holidays’ which have been preoccupied with researching and writing another book. So our special thanks to Maggie, Tom and Lottie, and to Gill, Nick and Caroline for reminding us that teaching is only ‘work’ and writing only a ‘hobby’.

We and our publishers would also like to thank those listed below for their permission to reproduce copyright material: for extracts from syllabi – the AEB, the SEG, the NEA, the LCCI, the RSA, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, the City and Guilds of London Institute, BTEC; for birthday cards – Andrew Valentine, Giesen and Wolf Ltd., Peverel Cards, Raphael Tuck, Wilson Brothers Greeting Cards Ltd. Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders: our apologies to those in cases where this has not proved possible.

# Introduction

Our aim is to provide practical information about teaching communication in schools and in post-compulsory education and training. We are seeking to identify a clearly laid out schema of what teaching communication means in practice.

The need to enable young people consciously to develop 'communication skills' is now firmly established – it can rest on a purely functional base and is often labelled 'English' or 'social and life skills' as well as 'communication'. We agree with that. But we want to go further.

First, in addition to learning 'skills', we believe that studying communication is about the personal development of attitudes and values; about knowing oneself; about knowing other people and relating to them; about critically understanding mass-media messages; and about being confident in the use of communication technologies.

Second, teaching communication is not about learning the requisite linguistic and social skills in isolation, like a series of performing tricks, but about acquiring knowledge of how and why we communicate and about the application of that knowledge.

Communicative competence in our life roles – personal, social and economic – is founded on our knowledge about social, cultural and economic contexts. It depends on using and applying that knowledge.

Third, in a school or college context the idea of communication skills still has the notion of something basic for the less able, something that can be left for the more able student to 'pick up'. We believe that all pupils and students should be deliberately exposed to some of the experiences and activities that we describe in this book as 'communication work'.

We enjoy being teachers of communication (most of the time!) since it provides a constant flow of new ideas and experiences. We hope that some of our enjoyment will be shared with you through this book.

**A note on the organization of this book**

It may be helpful to add a word of explanation about why we have arranged things as they are so that you can find your way round the book more easily. Chapter 1 outlines the assumptions, general aims and current ideas which we consider to be significant in the teaching of communication. We recommend that Chapters 2 and 3 are read together, since the 'what' and 'how' of teaching are clearly inseparable. 'The medium is the message' as we used to be urged to think by the late Marshall McLuhan. He was right, of course, but he took the notion too far for most people. In our case we felt that it was preferable to state what is being taught in simple descriptive terms without analysis, and to flesh this out with some sample course plans. These work schemes are not intended as models for you to follow, but rather as a particular approach that you can change to suit your own aims, needs and circumstances. In Chapter 3 we have sought to analyse and exemplify some of the issues and strategies of teaching that we have found useful.

Chapter 4 provides examples of teaching materials. It is a collection of resource ideas that you can use or adapt, such as introductory exercises, discussion/group-work topics; criteria by which to judge 'effective' communication; case studies and role plays; a sequence on advertising; a semiotic analysis of everyday objects; and a guide to finding your way round the library classification.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of some communication syllabuses available in the UK. A selection of resources and sources of information for teachers can be found in Chapter 6. Finally, in Chapter 7 we outline how the study of communication can be helpful in a variety of careers, and how it can be pursued at a variety of higher education institutions.

Graeme Burton  
Richard Dimbleby  
October 1988

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## **What about communication?**

This book is small but ambitious. It will deal with communication (including media) teaching in a wide range of situations, as taught by a diversity of teachers. We believe that we can take this approach precisely because communication work in all areas does have a great deal in common, whatever the syllabus or terms of reference. Indeed, one of the purposes of this book is to make this common ground apparent, to bring us all together.

### **Our audience**

You may be working with students of very different abilities and interests, in a wide range of institutions, or preparing to teach for the first time, but we hope that we have something to say about how communication may be taught which will be useful to all of you. This means that we are addressing those whose main interest is media studies, as well as those in communication work. It means that we are saying something to school teachers dealing with TVE or CPVE, and for FE teachers working with BTEC courses or other pre-vocational work. We address ourselves to GCE and GCSE teachers alike. And we hope that colleagues in polytechnics will also find something of value here. Certainly we hope that those being trained as teachers will want to read this book, and that we can introduce them to new concepts, new approaches, and a new subject.

In fact communication (or communication studies) is not so new any more. The first A-level examination was held in 1978, and degrees in the subject have been running for well over a decade. Communication work in a pre-vocational context at all levels has expanded enormously in the 1980s, with new syllabuses and forms of assessment significantly affected by the creation of BTEC. All the communication syllabuses and parts of courses have been modified and rationalized in content and objectives. This rationalization has brought those involved in pre-vocational and the so-called academic

## *What about communication?*

communication work closer together in many respects. We do not subscribe to value judgements about the relative merit of, say, A-level Communication Studies and BTEC People in Organizations. It is a fact that pre-vocational courses do not require as much explicit knowledge and use of theory as their GCE and GCSE counterparts. But there is still much common ground, not least in terms of those basic principles which underlie any communication practice. The BTEC National skills statement (see p. 136) represents a set of objectives that A-level teachers could do well to take on board. Pre-vocational communication is not utilitarian *per se*; practical work is a worthy part of any communication course.

## **Our purpose**

The main purpose of this book is to talk about what we teach and how we teach it. We will offer straight ideas about topics, concepts, and teaching methods. To this extent, this book takes a practical approach. We cannot please everyone, but we hope that every reader finds some ideas, and even some teaching methods or approaches, which they can take away and use. You will therefore gather that this book may do a little bit of preaching and flag-waving, but on the whole it will mark out territory and suggest possible routes across it. With the exception of some remarks in this chapter, we are not really interested in arguing the case for communication as a subject. If you are reading this book, then you are likely to be a practising communication teacher, or you think you will be one, or you are just curious. Whichever you are, we think it best to talk about the teaching. So this is not a book which espouses any particular educational theory. Nor will you find that this opening chapter is in any sense built on references to such theory or to the luminaries of that theoretical world.

## **The philosophy behind this book and communication work**

On the other hand, we are very prepared to offer some kind of philosophy on communication teaching as we see it. This isn't a justification, it is simply an account of the way we see things. These ideas are woven into this book. You may find them useful to argue through if you need to build or rebuild a communication course.

To begin with, we take the view that one is dealing with a *process*, in the case of any example of communication. As a process, communication is something continuous and active, with no boundaries and no beginning or end. As communicators we are everything that we have been and that our culture has been. But this does

not mean that all is chaos. What we do is to examine parts of the process, and see how they fit together. One looks at different theories for describing that process. And still one can deal in some principles – that communication will always have a purpose and a context, for example, and that such factors will always affect how communication takes place. So there are basics to deal with and to build on.

We also prefer to *integrate the semiotic approach* to communication with that of process. Communication is indeed all about the construction and use of signs and meaning, from one point of view. It is perfectly possible to see signification as working within process. Indeed, signs are the visible part of process. Unless one is able to make signs, to encode and decode them, then one lives in a meaningless world, unable to build bridges with others.

We accept that our communication techniques and sharing of meanings are rooted in often unacknowledged social, cultural, economic and political *experiences and traditions*. We all create our own meanings for and interpretations of communication acts in order to understand ourselves and the societies in which we live. Our readings of messages reflect our cultural and personal beliefs, biases and expectations. No two people will make an identical interpretation of the same text. They may make interpretations similar enough for them to agree about its meaning in general, or at least to agree as to why their interpretations differ. Since we are surrounded by messages from the various mass media it is essential that educational experience should enable people to analyse these messages and to understand how they are created. An understanding of the general processes of communication provides a way to probe the nature of media messages. At the heart of the study of communication is an attempt to understand and to make use of the processes and methods by which people use culturally-based signs and codes to express themselves and to share meanings with other people.

Another point which we would take as basic is that all study of communication is concerned with *how and why communication takes place*. We may study it for interest and pleasure; we may wish to understand it so that we can become better communicators. But it is still fundamental to be able to explain why we communicate as and when we do. It is also crucial to understand how we carry on this process if we are to understand other people and be understood by them.

We would also take the view that all communication courses can, in varying proportions, be described as being about *description, interpretation and practice*. That is to say, we must be able to describe accurately what is happening when communication takes

## *What about communication?*

place. We must then make sense of what we know. Finally, we must take something of our learning and put it into practice to become effective communicators.

This notion of becoming *an effective communicator* should also be implicit in even 'academic' courses. What is the use of knowledge and understanding if we can do nothing with it? And we do believe that it is possible to talk about effective communication, without invoking a rationale which is solely functional and instrumental. Being an effective communicator is obviously about communicating clearly what we mean, and being understood by others as a consequence. But it is also about personal qualities, such as consideration for others. An effective communicator takes into account as many factors in a given situation as possible. Being effective is not just about getting your own way, or delivering so many customers per minute to an advertising client. It is also about elements such as compassion and sympathy. An effective communicator will have the skill of empathy and will use it.

Another assumption which underlies our approach and which may underpin any communication course is that one is *teaching concepts which relate to skills*. These concepts are summarized in terms, factors, and models. They identify elements in the communication process, and help describe how communication is used and how it is carried on. They help both description and interpretation. From one point of view, when constructing a course, one must sort out what concepts are to be taught, explicitly or implicitly. But ideas are no good unless they inform practice.

In some quarters the notion of communication skills has become a dirty word because it has been misused, most frequently as a way of glossing over the fact that one may feel one is teaching something rather basic and very functional in a course which is in truth only generating job fodder. But in a more proper sense there is nothing wrong with teaching functional as opposed to intellectual or social skills.

If functional communication skills are approached as unproblematic, self-evident, mechanistic tricks which will make one a 'good' communicator, then this denies the subtle problem-solving choices that any communication task presents. Even in the simplest act of communication there are many choices to be made about what, why, when and how. For example, a model letter for a job application represents only a selection of topics and approaches: the writer of an actual letter must also make particular choices about vocabulary, information, structure, layout, tone and style, all of which reflect their personality, their view of who will read it and of the desired effect on this person. *Functional skills* presuppose a

context of *intellectual and social skills*, of knowledge and understanding. A communication course should deal with all three types of skill – all are valuable in terms of personal as well as vocational development.

This also leads on to the point that, even in overtly vocational communication courses or programmes, an effective course will still *develop the person and their capacity to handle relationships*, as well as *their ability to take effective action*. We take it as basic that a communication course should, in various degrees, be concerned with these three kinds of development.

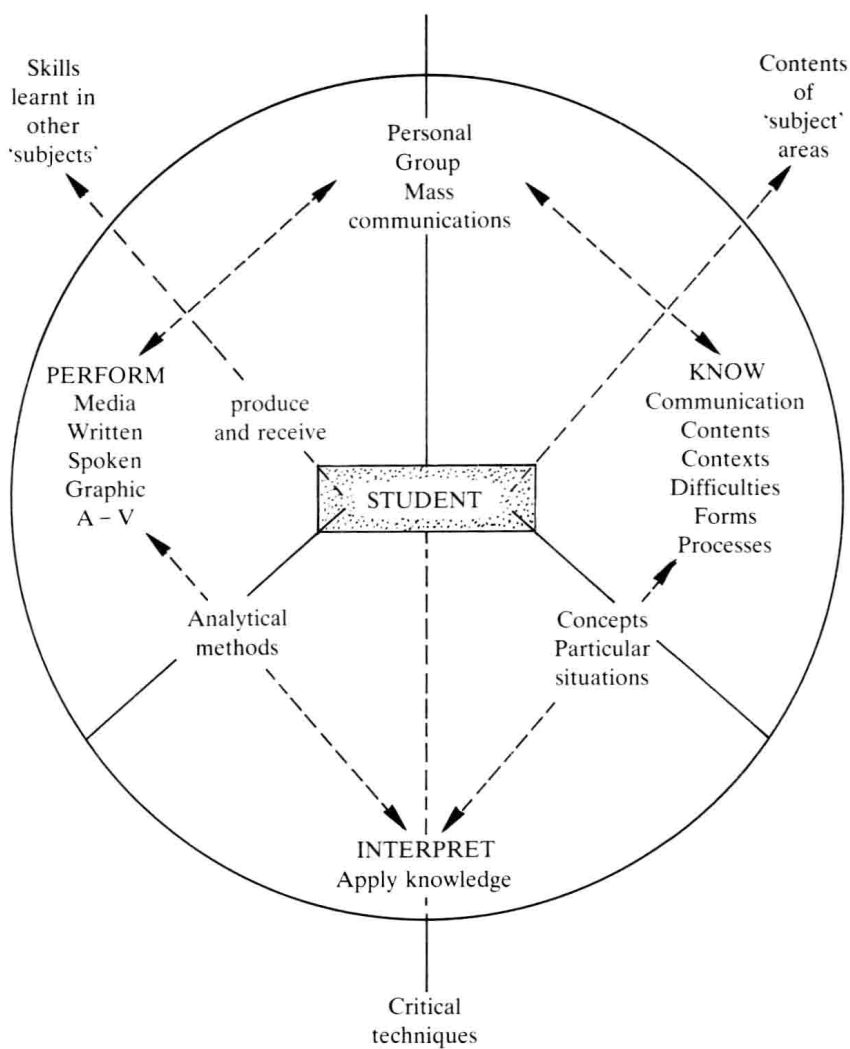
In talking about functional and social skills or relationships and action in the same breath, we run the risk of being accused of trying to reduce what is complex and personal to a set of simplistic rules and doubtful nostrums for social success. At the same time, it is true that one can identify agreed skills, and identify some conventions of behaviour that are likely to contribute to successful outcomes of interaction in personal and social terms. Not only do we think that it is reasonable to deal in various communication skills, but also we think that *knowledge and awareness brings the power to control*. So the argument for teaching an understanding of what is happening when we communicate is that it gives those with that understanding the ability to use it to modify their communication behaviour. This does not mean that one has to use theory or abstract terms. One does not have to get deep into semiology to convey the idea that many communication problems stem from the fact that the relationship between signs and meanings is arbitrary and culturally conditioned.

We are also writing out of a belief that *communication cannot be neutral per se* – that all utterances have behind them a weight of cultural attitudes and values. Part of the point of at least some communication courses is to identify and articulate these assumptions, and to try to evaluate the relative degrees of selection and bias which have formed them.

Finally, we consider it a basic principle that, begging a few minor qualifications, *communicative competence is learned and not inherited*. It is our philosophy that learning about communication is learning about what we have learned, and how we have learned it. Again, this knowledge gives us the potential for re-learning how we communicate. People always have the capacity for change. But that capacity may not be used unless the individual sees a way of changing and a reason for changing. Learning of any kind puts power in the mind of the learner. Communication practical work encourages use of that power to benefit the individual as a person, as a social being, and as a maker of communication in all its various forms.

## *What about communication?*

*Figure 1.1* Student-centred learning of communication





### **Some special features of communication work**

Having dealt with the assumptions and philosophy underpinning our approach to communication work, we would now like to turn to our ideas about what is distinctive in communication study and practice. We are not claiming that all topics, concepts, or teaching approaches to communication are unique in themselves (though some are). But we do think that when you put these together, you have something different, valuable and interesting.

First, there is the holistic approach – that is to say, communication teachers are dealing in a body of theory which pulls together and deals with both face-to-face communication, and mass communication. Acts of and experiences of communication figure largely in our lives, so we think that it is distinctive and useful that there is such an approach which attempts to make coherent sense of these acts and experiences.

Then there is the question of the range of media dealt with, both in theory and in practical work. This is particularly relevant when one discusses the relationship of communication to English or to media studies. Clearly, the three (call them subjects if you like) do co-relate. But equally obvious is the fact that only the broad communication approach accommodates all media or languages. It is significant that English in particular has been the subject from which many communication teachers have come, and that it is the subject which has recently tried to accommodate media elements in particular within, for example, GCSE syllabuses. However, communication teaching has already become established as a separate discipline, so one must accept these subjects as being complementary, and not try to duplicate work which communication courses are already covering.

Another point which seems distinctive to communication work is the integration of theory and practice. One should inform the other; indeed, one can teach out of one or the other. One may draw conclusions about communication factors and principles from an activity which has been carried out, or one may explain concepts and then both reinforce them and make them ‘real’ through the experience of some activity.

Communication work is also distinctive in the support which it can offer to other subjects in the curriculum. Indeed, it may be unique in its central role within any curriculum. Some people even feel that there should not be such a separate subject or module on the timetable, but that all communication work should be taught in the context of other subjects. However, we think that this would not only ignore what is distinctive about communication theory, but also